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Tai C. Pham

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Harmony and Conflict

by Tai C. Pham

Generally, all human beings have the same physical structure and needs, and all are affected by the same rules of nature. However, differences between geographical areas and diversities in development have contributed to build up numerous forms of world civilization, each of which depends on its particular environment. In this article, I would like to focus on two different cultures that I have experienced in my life: Vietnamese and American. These two cultures have some basic similarities but they also have a lot of differences. And although there are many things to discuss, I just want to talk about the three problems which I CONSIDER THE MOST INTERESTING. These are 1) the beliefs of the two countries, 2) the concept of the social behavior of each country's people and finally, 3) the personal characteristics and values of each.

First, the religions of America and Viet Nam have many differences. Most of the Americans are Christians but the majority of the Vietnamese are Buddhists; Christianity is basically an active religion when contrasted to passive Buddhism. Whereas the American believes only in one God who is the creator of this universe, the Vietnamese have numerous spirits to follow. Moreover, while Westerners like the Americans believe in and are proud of the powerful abilities of the human being and the advancement of science to discover and conquer the world gradually, the Vietnamese are convinced that human capacity is limited before a mysterious and immense nature; therefore they often show a humble attitude toward nature and always seek for harmony between man and nature. Despite these differences, both American and Vietnamese have no doubt about an immortal soul which exists in every human body. Consequently, they also believe in an eternal life after death, and in order to have happiness in that life one must always observe moral principles while he is alive.

As a result, this difference in belief sometimes leads to varied views in the minds of both Americans and Vietnamese on the subject of social behavior. Even though both groups of people are always concerned about a better conduct in social life and they all consider humility, honesty, and loyalty as the standards for their behaviors, they still apply different social codes in their daily lives. For instance, social etiquette differs in the American and Vietnamese cultures; while the Americans often display their feelings in public by hugging or greeting one another with kisses, the Vietnamese avoid any kind of physical contact in public places, especially among opposite sexes. In addition, the American people have a strict concept about time while time among the Vietnamese is very flexible. Indeed, few Vietnamese keep their appointments, being late even up to ten or fifteen minutes. This lapse, which could upset Americans, is a common thing in the Vietnamese way of life. Moreover, while being prompt to dinner invitations is highly stressed in the American world, such behavior might be interpreted as being too "greedy," or too enthusiastic and is usually avoided in Vietnam. It's also true that Vietnamese visits are often lengthy and unannounced while the reverse is true for the American. Another interesting thing in America is the "Dutch treat," which is not a Vietnamese custom, unless sharing the costs are made clear at the moment of invitation. Finally, whereas the Americans usually call everyone by his or her name in their daily conversations, the Vietnamese always show respect to their elders by not calling them by their names or even not calling their children by name if they were named after a dead forefather.

The last category to be discussed in this article is the different views on the ideas of personal characteristics and values between the Americans and the Vietnamese. From a value system, based on a combined influence of Buddhism and Confucianism, the typical personal characteristics of the Vietnamese could seem contradictory to Americans. Being modest and humble is a characteristic of the Vietnamese when compared to the more aggressive and direct approach of the American. For instance, a Vietnamese often declines

to accept praise because of modesty, and it is not in the Vietnamese custom to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and possessions without being asked to do so. Whereas Americans don't care much about the type of job they have, Vietnamese often look down upon a manual job as it is reserved for less educated people. Furthermore, while a Vietnamese seems "loyal" to his employer, an American isn't reluctant to change jobs and to move ahead. It's true that in Vietnam, often a Vietnamese will work for the same firm or same employer for all his life.

To summarize, some general views and examples about "harmony" and "conflict" between two different cultures, America and Vietnam are illustrated. However, we judge which one is better but we have to see each culture as placed in its own situation, and we have to believe that the common purpose of each culture is always the development of humanity and the happiness of all human beings. Above all, we can say that all humankind is similar in one sense and also very different in another. Therefore, to learn and to understand another culture is an advantage in helping people know each other better.



My Guardian Angel

by Rose Magdziarz

"So you want that book banned?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because it can corrupt the mind. It's immoral. If any of our children should get a hold of this type of garbage they won't be able to function as normal adults. They won't think the right way."

"You read that book?"

"Yes. The language is atrocious. Why I learned a few new filthy words myself!"

"You read those words?"

"Yes."

"Did you read the entire book?"

"Yes. I had to read the whole trashy thing in order to give an opinion on it."

"Are you corrupt?"

"Of course not. I go to church every Sunday!"

"Why weren't you affected by the words in that book?"

"Because I'm an adult. I have a mind of my own."

"Do children have minds?"

"Yes. They have minds that must be guided. They must be shielded."

"Are the adults who read pornography immoral?"

"Of course they are."

"What is pornography?"

"That book is one example."

"And people who read pornography are immoral."

"Yes."

"You read that book?"

"I didn't read the whole book."

"If you didn't read the whole book then how do you know its pornography? You did say that you did read the entire book, didn't you?"

"HMMMMM..."

"You did read that book, right?"

"I'm decent. I was horrified when I was reading that book. That book is not fit to be in our library."

"What horrified you so?"

"The language."

"Is this book directed to children?"

"I should hope not!"

"Is it intended for adults?"